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ABSTRACT

To obtain from students information for formative evaluation of instruction, course-specific questionnaires were developed with individual faculty. Forms were introduced by a statement that the purpose of evaluation was to improve instruction. Although items varied with the course, all had potential action implications and all requested recommendations for change. Results supporting the effectiveness of course-specific evaluation are reported. Information derived instigated responsive faculty action. Several instructional research projects have been initiated. In both courses in which forms were administered during consecutive years, statistically significant improvement was shown for items related to changes introduced but not for other items. (Author)

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The Use of Course-Specific Questionnaires in Formative Evaluation

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When teachers evaluate student performance, it is accepted that specific identification of strengths and weaknesses more than a letter grade will guide the student's efforts to do better the next time. The same principle should apply when teachers consult students about their own performance for the purpose of effecting positive change. Nevertheless, most course evaluation is accomplished through the use of forms comprised of items that apply across virtually all disciplines and all types of courses. From students' responses to these questionnaires one derives mean ratings on attributes such as value of readings, clarity of objectives and value of the course as a whole. These ratings may serve to elate or depress instructors, to influence administrative action (rarely) and, if the results are made available publicly, to influence the exercise of student option. They are probably less useful for formative evaluation.

This paper describes one effort to develop effective instruments for formative evaluation. The viability of the method is assessed by three criteria: (1) the generation of information with direct implications for instructional change; (2) the initiation of cooperative projects which have general applicability for instructional improvement and (3) the improvement of ratings resulting from responsive faculty action.

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In an effort to reach the goals listed above, general evaluation forms had been made available to faculty. On the basis of mean scores and frequency distributions, reports were prepared. Recommendations consisted of little more than exhortations to improve whatever attributes students rated low. We could provide nothing more than a phenotypic diagnosis and could prescribe no treatment. There was no way to derive from student ratings determinants of poor ratings or actions that might be expected to have a salutary effect. Evaluations may have reassured or discouraged faculty but there was no evidence whatever for the improvement of instruction. No teacher reported that changes had been suggested by evaluations or had initiated an instructional project.

Last year we began to develop, in cooperation with individual faculty, evaluation forms designed to have clear action implications within their courses. Although, by intent, items varied from course to course, all were designed to lead to instructional change and all asked students themselves to recommend specific changes. Forms were prefaced with a statement that the purpose of evaluation was to improve instruction and that recommendations would be carefully considered by faculty. The intent of this statement was not only to engage the best efforts of students but also formally to commit faculty to positive action. Items included questions pertaining to the appropriateness and realization of each course objective, and methods used to attain and evaluate the accomplishment of each objective. Critical incident items asking for description of situations in which a teacher did something especially helpful or detrimental to student learning were frequently used.

The immediately apparent advantage of course-specific evaluations was the rich supply of information offered for diagnosis of course problems and prescribed treatment. Furthermore, reports generated responsive faculty action. To cite one example, in a practice management course students rated the relevance of each project to dental practice and stated information and skills they wished to acquire. Most projects were rated low and new skills and information were identified. The instructor eliminated projects, scheduled lecturers from other disciplines and is developing criterion tests and instructional materials simulating decision making in private practice.

A second effect has been the initiation of instructional projects. Students' complaints about faculty inconsistency in evaluating performance has led to a project to improve inter-judge reliability. Positive response to sequential models of technic products and the judgment that performance would be improved if poor as well as good examples were provided has motivated a project in discrimination learning. Descriptions of positive and negative critical incidents in clinical instruction has led to the production of videotaped critical incidents for faculty training.

Course-specific evaluation has been used in consecutive years in two courses. In a technics course, student-faculty rapport was rated low. Additional data showed that two-thirds of students rated faculty availability one or two on a five point scale and critical incident reports emphasized long waits at check points and hostile, uninformative faculty evaluation. Several recommendations were made

but the most obvious problem was that students were frustrated by low faculty availability and faculty overburdened by excessive demands. The course director presented findings to administration and secured additional staff. The following year less than a quarter of students rated faculty availability at one or two. More importantly, student-faculty rapport and over-all course evaluation improved significantly (t test) while ratings of attributes not treated (e.g. value of readings) did not change. In a course in dental hygiene critical incident data and responses to other questions revealed problems in consistency among instructors in recommended procedures and evaluation. The course director developed videotapes demonstrating procedures and supplied faculty and students with statements of objectives and assessment instruments. The following year, statistically significant (t test) improvement was shown in questions concerning staff preparation, flexibility, knowledge and enthusiasm but not in attributes unrelated to changes introduced.

We have found course-specific evaluation effective for formative evaluation. One gain has been the universal faculty response of: "If I know how to improve my course, I will" and action affirming that statement. Many student recommendations are clear applications of principles of learning and instruction which, perhaps paradoxically, gain credence by being offered by students. Several faculty independently requested that students be apprised of recommendations acted upon by faculty. This feedback, now instituted as an integral part of the evaluation process, should encourage the continued best effort of students as critics of their own instruction and contributors to positive instructional change.